

*Restorative Practice as the new normal: a first intervention to support mental health in Milton Keynes schools*

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## **Introduction**

I am not writing this paper as a solution to mental health problems in schools, or as an explanation for why these problems are increasing in scale. Rather my intention is to report on a social approach to organising life in schools that is making a difference to the mental health of our pupils. We have now been implementing Restorative Practices for more than 6 years.

There are different assumptions informing a ‘mental health’ perspective and a ‘social health’ perspective. Mental health implies that when problems occur they exist within the wiring of an individual’s cognitive or emotional make-up. The problems may be a consequence of genetic pre-determined differences and defects, or they may have been brought about by abusive or unhappy events in family or social life. Solutions to mental health problems are sought initially through a diagnosis, often entailing a lengthy period of assessment by a range of experts. Decisions on what to do are frequently made at some distance from where the problems are occurring.

Restorative Practice involves a focus on promoting the ‘social health’ of a school community. When problems occur, there is an assumption that those people most closely involved will get together to consider ways of easing the concern. Social health is created and re-created on a daily basis with individuals who are working and playing together in a school environment. Differences and difficulties will be regarded as opportunities for learning and development - rather than as deficits to be identified, cured or removed. Social health involves rights and responsibilities to be exercised, rather than ‘individual needs’ to be examined and certified.

## **A Contribution to Social Health**

Restorative practice in Milton Keynes has been promoted through the work of the Restorative Foundation ([www.restorativefoundation.org.uk](http://www.restorativefoundation.org.uk)) which at its peak was impacting behaviour management in nearly 40 Milton Keynes

schools. Since 2012-13, it has shifted gear to embrace a Vygotskian perspective on development as described by Lois Holzman (2017) and a communication perspective on the making of social worlds, as described by Barnett Pearce (2007). In doing so, it has created a huge opportunity for those schools that are concerned not only with how they manage relational breakdown but also with how they build the social environments they want children to experience. This is of first importance in any discussion of adult and child mental health, because how we define what is the consistent “normal” in our schools will define the “background radiation” of language and action that community members can increasingly depend upon. Developing a culture of respectful relationships is the central concern of schools involved with restorative practice in Milton Keynes.

The provision of a restorative baseline informing ‘how we relate with each other’ is hugely powerful in offering all children a safe and predictable space in which to learn. For those children who are shy, self-absorbed or prone to childhood depressive tendencies, it offers a model of acceptance in relationships that supports their development in the social world of school. If a child experiences school as a place where all adults speak well of each other, neither giving nor taking offence, the example they have to follow can only be beneficial. For children who present with a condition on the autistic spectrum, such dependable behaviour in a school community provides an increasingly predictable factor in their social learning.

The impact of restorative practices involving ‘community-building circles’ and ‘learning conversations’ is foundational, not just to partnerships beyond school, but to the establishment of a consistent, explicit, restorative and respectful culture in which all can develop, and which provides the “ground” that encourages and promotes good mental health.

### **A note on human flourishing and wellbeing**

The terms ‘human flourishing’ and ‘wellbeing’ are used a great deal at the moment, and in this paper I prefer the former to the latter, chiefly because it is a less static and more growth-oriented term. Many people refer to wellbeing as a personal and internal condition, rather than as a social good that impacts those around us. While internal personal wellbeing will have undoubted beneficial effects for those suffering with conditions of mental

health, the true impact of wellbeing, and the route to it, will be outward focused.

The charity Mind argues for five areas of positive wellbeing – connectedness, being physically active, taking notice of the world around you, active learning and giving yourself to active participation in community life (Mind, 2017). These are more “active” than definitions commonly associated with “wellbeing”.

Rooted in the thinking of the 4<sup>th</sup> century divine Augustine of Hippo as expounded by Miroslav Volf (2013), I can relate to the view that: true human flourishing points away from *individual experiential satisfaction* towards *rich fellowship with our neighbour*; from *human self-improvement* towards *compassion for the weak*; from a concern for *living well* personally, to concern for the *welfare of our society*.

## **Effective community building and the conditions for flourishing**

Relational breakdown only becomes a true learning experience when both (or all) participants have previously contributed to a community that contains meaning for them. This is why family rows have such emotional power and can lead to such devastating consequences – a betrayal of emotional investment of love or dependence can become, for a child in particular, one of the most damaging, dislocating, detaching experiences possible. A child puts a huge amount of emotional investment into the togetherness of their “family” relationship, and as is well understood, the effects of separation and divorce may be experienced as temporarily crippling. So, the invitation to each member of a class to contribute emotionally and with “love-in-action” to the common class wellbeing and growth of community is not without risk. Initially, it is important for staff to take a lead in creating an emotional space where each child may experience a sense of connection and belonging.

The process begins with “articulated acceptance” at the start of the day in a community-building circle. In our school, we repeatedly use the term *community-building* as a descriptor of circles because the more we articulate purpose, the more we understand the effect that such circles have on us, and the better we can make sense of our role in that community. Over time, it is easy to forget the impact that such circles have on our children, and constant renewal as to its purpose is required. The language and practice we adopt is informed by protocols outlined in the adjoining insert on ‘Making Circles Work For Us’. A desired impact from circles is to build a “dependable culture of respectful kindness”.

## MAKING CIRCLES WORK FOR US

**Circles**...a time to “check in” and “check out”

**Circles**...have rules or norms—

everyone decides/agrees these.

**Circles**...connected by a simple topic

that all can subscribe to.

**Circles**...regular, planned and purposeful.

**Circles**... build on our commonly held values

and don’t in any way undermine them.

**Circles**...can have a talking piece to

hold and pass on—a bear, a microphone, a

rock or a shell are all good talking pieces.

**Circles**...include everyone;

nobody sits out and all get to speak.

**Circles**...are a place where

all are equal and feel equal,

where all are included and feel included.

**Circles**...give everyone a voice

In building a sense of community, both within and beyond the routine of holding regular circles, our ways of talking are marked by the following characteristics:

1. **Welcome.** In UK culture, we have few formal ways of welcoming, but it is critical to the development of good mental health that we do not ignore one another when we first meet in the morning. There is a deep sense in which we *matter* through welcome. The formality of it sometimes seems stale, but thanking children for coming to school, for being part of our class, inviting them to take their place in the class, using specific language that conveys this, is of first importance. This stretches to enquiry about their journey to school, how they slept, how their parent(s) or siblings are and comments about the weather – all of these small social niceties add to the rich sense of welcome that each child stores away in their mental constructs of what it means to be with such a teacher and in such a class. It stretches further: to the learning environment and display, and to all evidence showing that the teacher cares for the class and how it looks and feels. All of these add to welcome. Recently I visited a nursery where the teacher had lowered the ceiling with ornate fabrics and replaced the small world kitchen plastic with proper crockery. She gave thought to

each area of the class and ensured that it invited children to a sense of homeliness. The welcoming feel of a class is a critical teaching tool at the beginning of the day. This has some implications for school architecture, for reception areas and for the pervasive security doors now part of each school.

2. **Acceptance.** Teachers help children learn about acceptance with actions such as: smiling at one another, speaking well of each other, waiting for one another to speak, learning not to react negatively, but to appreciate and enjoy differences between us - finding things in each other where 'you are better than me', appreciating our individual humanity as unique and cherished, learning and repeating "mantras" of acceptance ("in this class we are all equally important; even if sometimes we feel less important or more important than others, really we are all equally important"). Acceptance is an umbrella for *inclusion* which must be demonstrated by acceptance in words and actions - firstly from the teacher or adult in the class, and then by the children toward each other.
  
3. **Service.** Children may find it hard to know how to serve one another - developing their capacity to be 'giving' rather than 'taking'. We need to model and teach actions and language that support small gestures such as: bringing resources for a whole table rather than just for themselves, being aware of each other's requirements. Very young children will need rubrics to help: "In this class we help one another and we show this by, for example, holding the door open for the class/giving out the books in class/supporting others when they need help, etc." In this way, service to a community becomes one with children's natural desire to be helpful to their teacher and friends, and endows their "helpful actions" with a community-building purpose.

4. **Equity and equality.** Flowing from acceptance, teachers need to articulate and emphasise the value they give to a sense of equality, ensuring that there is a tangible outcome in *equality of voice*. In circles, it is important that ways are found to make sure all contribute because all are important and everyone's voice needs to be heard. For some children, it will be important to offer individual preparation before a circle and to provide adequate thinking time before the circle begins.
5. **Honour and respect.** Honour is the quality that links respect for an individual with a sense of wonder and reverence for their humanity and celebration for their achievements. It can be enough just to articulate respect, of course, but a culture of honour has more power and a language of its own that places an "honoured" individual on a higher level than simply respecting them. As a minimum, community-building circles cannot function without a mutuality of respect growing among the class.
6. **Responsibility and contribution.** As a child becomes familiar with their class community-building circles, they will begin to see that they have an equality of voice and that this has an impact on those around them. They will begin to understand that their contribution, and the way they contribute, has become part of a wider whole which itself has a distinct identity. In order for responsibility to be shown and contributions to flourish, protocols for action will be discussed and agreed with the class group.
7. **Shared conduct and values.** All communities cohere around ground rules for peaceful conduct, with an agreed set of values or virtues that define activities in the community and embody its purpose. Boundary conditions provide the contours for how people within communities develop. The wise teacher will lead consultative discussions as to "what goes" in their class circles,

including their class language and what keeps all individuals safe and secure.

Community-building circles create and inform a process of flourishing among children by providing experiences of mutual respect and acceptance, equality and a code of conduct - all of which contribute to the making of a social world in which children may feel increasingly safe, loved, trusted and respected. For the child who is struggling with family discord, such an environment provides a trust in adults and friends and offers a powerful context for the content of learning: as a good thing to do, in a good place to be.

### **The social activity of dialogue**

Part of being human is our legendary ability to screw things up (Spufford, 2013). Good community is good because it has the ability to cope with behaviours that are potentially destructive of it. Our built community is what is offended against when its members fall out with each other. Children who have learned to value a socially healthy community will soon learn that when their actions involve hurt or harm for others, the ramifications are likely to be class-wide because everyone has a stake in the repair of relationships. If handled carefully, this can provide a genuine safety net of understanding and acceptance in a class. If handled poorly by the adult, it can leave those who have messed up feeling isolated and rejected. The creation of a communal fellowship and a restoration of social health is the aim of restorative dialogue. The ability of a school community to engage in this restoration of fellowship provides safety and purpose for those whose mental health is perturbed by the discord they witness, cause or are affected by in their class.

In their training programme, The Restorative Foundation propose three levels of dialogue to help create restorative learning: immediate feedback (a brief exchange inviting individuals to respond to the adverse affects of their actions); learning conversations (one-to-one conversations that take place to discuss what has occurred); and restorative meetings (where more people take part in a formal process of creating new learning and development for those involved). The first two of these levels are the most common currency of school restorative work, but all three have strong features in common, mainly:

**Affirmation:** Positive affirmation for the worth and value of the individual. This is critical in preserving a child's self-esteem at a time when they may feel vulnerable and defensive. When individuals experience a sense of being valued by others and they are not pre-occupied with defending themselves, they are able to reflect on their actions and on the options for making amends.

**Information:** Clear information about the personal impact of their words and actions. In this we use the language of affectedness, expressing upset and disappointment as social information and not as a lever of power. We find out what happened in a non-judgmental manner, providing opportunities for each individual to describe their own unique perspective. Rather than pursuing a line of enquiry about causes, we explore together how others have been affected. This is an opportunity for individuals to imagine how others may be feeling and on how relationships in their social community have been affected.

**Reformation and restoration:** From the questioner's perspective, the intention is to support individuals in considering ways of going forward that are in keeping with values of fairness and justice. Individuals are supported in facing up to the consequences of their actions and given an opportunity to put things right so that all may move forward with dignity and respect intact. Sometimes, and this is a common feature of the work at Christ the Sower, children are invited to receive the wrongdoer back into the class when the class-group as a whole has been affected.

The creation of new meaning in restorative conversations will often lead to new and imaginative ways of progressing. "Yes...and..." conversations rather than the more usual "Yes.... but" responses impose a discipline on the listener, but more importantly ascribe worth to the person who has just spoken. In this conversation, the "yes" becomes a genuine agreement and affirmation rather than just a pause-word whilst a counter-argument is marshalled. The completing of these conversation cycles leads to a richer mutual respect and paves the way for all to find a clear way forward without resorting to externally imposed solutions.



## **Separation of personhood and actions in the restorative framework**

One of the strongest messages that the work of the Restorative Foundation contributes to the development of social and mental health has been a clarification that the choices we make in our social actions are just that – choices: they are not a representation of who we are. Choices are the invitations we make to others in a process of making meaning together. They are the route to our development but they can also be the route to fixed and negative perceptions of self and others.

The language and attitudes involved in restorative practice separate out the personhood of an individual – held in unconditional positive regard, as a cherished and loved individual – from the actions they have chosen that may contribute to a relational breakdown. It is extremely hard to be forgiven for *who we are*; much easier to be forgiven for actions. When a person's actions begin to define them as that sort of person (eg. a bully), they will require the restorative work of knowing that through change, love, support and clarity of decision-making, they can leave bullying behaviour behind.

Without the separation of self from action, guilt may create a huge identity crisis for a person, leading to the long-term perception that no matter what they do, they will never be accepted or be good enough. Millions of adults live already under this crippling perception. We do not want to be responsible for creating any more. The message that *in our school, who you are is loved, accepted, cherished and respected, but what you do has consequences that may be learned from* – repeated over and over by all adults, every day, until it is part of our school DNA, will contribute to an emotionally conducive environment for mental and social health in our school community.

## **Conclusion**

From the perspective of a school in Milton Keynes, this brief article has begun to identify those aspects of restorative practice that have contributed to creating an environment where the “three children in every class that have mental health concerns” (Draper, 2016) may find clarity, social acceptance, love and a place where their struggles will be respected.

In supporting the development of all pupils, restorative practice helps to

build socially healthy learning environments. These are environments in which all children are accepted and valued for 'who they are'. The task of the school is to help children engage in a learning process that will focus on 'who they are becoming'.

Restorative practice creates learning environments where all young people are accepted for who they are and supported in who they are becoming (their development). This is a practice that builds the mental health of individuals by building the social health of the environments in which young people are active and valued participants.

In socially healthy school environments, children learn to take risks in developing their ideas and actions. This is a culture in which mistakes and differences are regarded as opportunities for learning and development.

## References

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